

The Basis Problem for Epistemological Disjunctivism revisited

Harmen Ghijsen

Introduction

Duncan Pritchard (2012b) has defended a version of epistemological disjunctivism which holds that in a paradigmatic case of perceptual knowledge, one knows that p in virtue of having the reflectively accessible reason that one sees that p . This view faces what Pritchard (2011; 2012b) has introduced as the *basis problem*: if seeing that p just *is* a way of knowing that p , then that one sees that p cannot constitute the rational basis in virtue of which one knows that p . According to Pritchard, this problem can be dealt with by reducing seeing that p to being in a good position to know that p rather than simply knowing that p . However, there is sufficient reason to be skeptical about this response, or so I will argue.

In §1 I briefly present the main thesis of Pritchard's epistemological disjunctivism and its official response to the basis problem. Next, in §2, I explain why 'being in a good position to know' is actually a misnomer for the proposed alternative account of seeing, after which I try to reconstruct Pritchard's proposal in some more detail. Finally, in §3, I argue that the alternative account of seeing cannot be upheld on the basis of the example that is meant to support it. First, the example relies too heavily on how a subject would treat his own situation, and, second, a parallel example can be constructed against Pritchard's own account. The basis problem thus remains problematic for Pritchard's epistemological disjunctivism.

1 Epistemological Disjunctivism and the Basis Problem

Pritchard presents his epistemological disjunctivism as a theory which captures the key elements of internalism and externalism (Pritchard, 2012b, p. 1–5). We want the rational support for our beliefs to be reflectively accessible, just as the internalist claims, but we also want a connection between our rational support and the truth of the beliefs supported, just as the externalist stresses. Pritchard combines these desiderata in the following account of perceptual knowledge:

In paradigmatic cases of perceptual knowledge an agent, S , has perceptual knowledge that ϕ in virtue of being in possession of rational support, R , for her belief that ϕ which is both *factive* (i.e., R 's obtaining entails ϕ) and *reflectively accessible* to S .
(Pritchard, 2012b, p. 13)

By combining factivity and reflective accessibility, both the internalist and externalist should get what they want — at least for paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge. In such a paradigm case, a subject perceptually knows that p because he sees that p is the case (Pritchard, 2012b, p. 14). This reason, that one sees such-and-so to be the case, is both reflectively accessible, because a subject can come to know through reflection that he sees such-and-so to be the case, and factive, because one cannot see that something is the case without it's actually being the

case.¹ In other words, Pritchard seems to have located a kind of rational basis for perceptual knowledge that will meet both internalist and externalist desiderata.

However, there is trouble on the horizon. Pritchard faces a dilemma when it comes to explaining what seeing that p amounts to. One intuitive and popular conception of seeing that p maintains the following:

SK Seeing that p is a specific way of **knowing** that p (e.g., Williamson, 2000; Cassam, 2007; Millar, 2010).

If SK is correct, then seeing that p cannot be the rational basis in virtue of which one knows that p (this is what Pritchard calls the *basis problem*). This would make the perceptual knowledge that p literally self-supporting, which appears to be an unacceptable view of empirical knowledge.

On the other hand, Pritchard also wants to accommodate the intuition that Barney, looking at the one real barn in fake barn county (Goldman, 1976), does *not* know that there is a barn in front of him (Pritchard, 2012b, p. 32). Barney's belief that there is a barn in front of him could have been false too easily to count as knowledge. But if Barney is able to see that there is a barn in front of him, then he will supposedly count as *knowing* that there is a barn in front of him. For on that supposition, Barney has a reflectively accessible factive reason available to him, namely, the fact that he sees that p . So Pritchard has to provide an alternative to SK on which Barney does not see that p . This means that accounts that reduce seeing that p to veridically representing that p , or standing in the right causal connections to the fact that p , are all out of the question: on those accounts, Barney would see that p .

The challenge for Pritchard thus is to present an account of seeing that is less epistemically demanding than SK, but sufficiently epistemically demanding to prevent Barney from seeing that p . Pritchard explicitly considers this challenge and proposes the following:

A crucial distinction that we need to draw is between being in a state that guarantees knowledge and being in a state that *guarantees that one is in a good position* to gain knowledge, even if one is unable to properly exploit this opportunity. I want to suggest that seeing that p is factive and robustly epistemic in the weaker latter sense rather than in the more robust former sense.

(Pritchard, 2012b, p. 26).

Given this distinction between being in a state that guarantees knowledge and being in a state that guarantees that one is in a good position to gain knowledge that p , Pritchard seems to propose the following alternative account of seeing that p :

SPK Seeing that p is a specific way of being in a good **position** to **know** that p .²

To support SPK over SK, Pritchard provides us with the following example:

Suppose [...] that one is in a situation in which one is genuinely visually presented with a barn and circumstances are in fact epistemically good [...]. But now suppose further that one has been told, by an otherwise reliable informant, that one is

¹Note that Pritchard has not provided a precise account of 'coming to know through reflection', but I will skip this point here and go for an intuitive understanding of what one is able to know through reflection in the case where one is actually perceiving such-and-so. According to the epistemological disjunctivist this is importantly different from what one is able to know through reflection in the case where one is hallucinating such-and-so.

² One referee suggested that Pritchard's claim might be better interpreted as one of entailment, i.e., as the claim that if one sees that p , then one is in a good position to know that p . First, let me note that the arguments I present against SPK's motivation would work equally well against the motivation for this alternative claim. Second, the alternative claim would leave unexplained *why* this entailment holds, whereas SPK explains this by pointing out that seeing that p just *is* a specific way of being in a position to know that p .

presently being deceived even though this is in fact not the case [...]. Clearly, in such a case one ought not to believe the target proposition, and hence one cannot possibly know this proposition either.

(Pritchard, 2012b, p. 26)

Even though the subject in this scenario does not know that there is a barn before him as he does not even believe it, Pritchard maintains that he does *see* that there is a barn in front of him. Pritchard's reason for this claim is that, upon discovery that the received testimony was false, the subject *would treat himself as having seen that* there was a barn before him. According to Pritchard, this is a very natural way for the subject to describe his own situation once he has learned of all the relevant facts (ibid.). Moreover, with SPK in hand Pritchard can now provide the following full explanation of what is going on in the example:

[...] given that the defeater in play is misleading, one is *in fact* in a good position to gain knowledge of the target proposition in this case, it is just that one's inability to defeat the misleading defeater undermines one's ability to exploit this epistemic opportunity.

(Pritchard, 2012b, p. 27)

In what follows I will first investigate SPK in more detail (§2) before I go on to argue that Pritchard's example cannot be used to support it (§3).

2 A Closer Look at Pritchard's Alternative

On consideration, the phrase 'being in a good position to know' appears to be a misnomer for the account of seeing that Pritchard proposes. To see this, note that Pritchard remarks that the subject in his example "cannot possibly know" (Pritchard, 2012b, p. 26) that the target proposition obtains. But then it certainly is not intuitive to hold that the subject is still in a good position to know the target proposition: how could one be in a good position to know that *p* if one simultaneously cannot possibly know that *p*? This tension cannot be resolved by claiming that the subject is in fact in a good position to know that *p* but unable to exploit this opportunity.

So what is Pritchard really after in his account of seeing that *p*? Pritchard explains being in a good position to know that *p* as being in a scenario that is *objectively* epistemically good (Pritchard, 2012b, p. 31). Such a scenario is one in which the environment does not contain many fake look-a-likes, deceivers are not present, perceptual faculties are working properly, etc. The idea is that an agent in an objectively epistemically good scenario "is reliably forming her perceptual beliefs in such a manner that they will inevitably be true in environments which are suitably conducive to this belief-forming process, and that the agent is in just such an environment" (Pritchard, 2012b, p. 29). These scenarios should be contrasted with scenarios that are *subjectively* epistemically good, where one has no defeaters for one's beliefs and correctly bases one's beliefs on the available evidence (Pritchard, 2012b, pp. 30–32).

Pritchard analyzes his own example as one in which the subject is in an objectively epistemically good, but subjectively epistemically bad scenario. Both objective and subjective epistemic goodness matter for knowing that *p*, but only objective epistemic goodness matters for seeing that *p*. Thus, the subject in Pritchard's example sees that there is a barn before him without knowing that there is a barn before him. In contrast, Barney is in a subjectively epistemically good but objectively epistemically bad scenario, so he neither sees nor knows that there is a barn before him.

Although this way of cashing out SPK gets the cases right for Pritchard’s epistemological disjunctivism, it’s not clear that seeing that p really is reducible to a specific sort (viz., visual) of objective epistemic goodness. Consider the following variation on Pritchard’s own Temp-case (Pritchard, 2012a):

Angelica’s perceptual mechanisms are such that, when functioning properly, they often lead to rather harmless perceptual illusions. Fortunately for her, she has a guardian angel who is determinate to protect her from forming false beliefs about the world by adapting the world to fit Angelica’s perceptual experiences. For instance, when Angelica looks at the Müller-Lyer lines, her guardian angel actually lengthens the line that, at first, merely looked longer to Angelica, to make sure that the belief Angelica forms on the basis of her experience is actually true.

In this case, Angelica reliably forms her beliefs on the basis of her properly functioning perceptual mechanisms, but there is still something wrong. Her perceptual experiences successfully represent the world only because the guardian angel adapts the world to fit them, instead of the experiences being adapted to fit the world. The perceptual experiences thus have the wrong direction of fit, which makes it implausible to count Angelica as seeing that, say, the Müller-Lines from the example are unequal even though she is in an objectively epistemically good scenario. Angelica can thus be used against the idea that seeing that p is reducible to being in an objectively epistemically good scenario.³

One way around this problem is to define objectively epistemically good scenarios as those in which an agent would have gained knowledge if he did not have any defeaters and had based his beliefs correctly on his evidence. That is, we take knowledge as primitive, and define objectively epistemically good scenarios in terms of knowledge. Given that Pritchard seems to take being in an objectively epistemically good scenario as being in a good position to *know*, this might not be such a bad interpretation of his position. However, it would mean that Pritchard’s epistemological disjunctivism can no longer be taken as a reductive account of perceptual knowledge, but should rather be understood as a version of a knowledge first account (Williamson, 2000). This is already a first interesting finding about his theory. In what follows, I will interpret SPK in the knowledge first way, although most of the arguments do not hinge on this interpretation.

3 Problems for Pritchard

3.1 Treating oneself as having seen that p

Now that we have a better idea of what SPK comes down to, we can start to evaluate the example meant to support it over SK. Recall that the example is as follows:

Suppose [...] that one is in a situation in which one is genuinely visually presented with a barn and circumstances are in fact epistemically good [...]. But now suppose further that one has been told, by an otherwise reliable informant, that one is presently being deceived even though this is in fact not the case [...]. Clearly, in

³ What if, as one referee suggests, we interpret Pritchard’s view weaker, as one which holds simply that seeing that p is a way of coming to know that p just as reading that p is a way of coming to know that p ? Reading that p does not entail that one is in a good position to know that p even though it can be a way of coming to know that p . First of all, this suggestion would not fit with the fact that Pritchard himself claims that seeing that p should be interpreted as being in a state which *guarantees* that one is in a good position to know that p (see the above quote before the introduction of SPK in §1). Reading that p does not guarantee that one is in a good position to know that p , and neither would seeing that p on this interpretation. Second, this view of seeing that p would become so weak that it would be trivial. Even proponents of the non-factivity of seeing that p could accept it.

such a case one ought not to believe the target proposition, and hence one cannot possibly know this proposition either [...]

[...] suppose that one were to discover subsequently that the testimony one received was false, but that everything else one knows about the circumstances in which one was presented with this (apparent) barn remained the same. Wouldn't one now retrospectively treat oneself as having earlier seen that there was a barn?

(Pritchard, 2012b, p. 26)

The first problem with this example is that it leans heavily on the thought that if one were to treat oneself as having seen that p , one would count as actually having seen that p .⁴ Although I think it is likely that the subject in Pritchard's scenario will treat himself as having seen that p , this, by itself, provides little reason to think he actually saw that p . Compare Pritchard's example in which someone treats himself as having seen that p after he comes to know that he had misleading evidence to the following scenario in which someone treats himself as having *known* that p after he comes to know that he had misleading evidence.⁵

A thief, Theo, believes that the diamonds he is after are in a certain place. Subsequently, his partner in crime tells him that the diamonds have been moved. While Theo's partner speaks sincerely, has good evidence for her claim and Theo has every reason to trust her, she is mistaken on this particular occasion: the diamonds are still in the same place. Although, let us suppose, Theo is unable to defeat the defeater he has just acquired, he continues to truly believe that the diamonds are in the relevant place. Theo goes ahead with the robbery and finds the diamonds in the very place he believed them to be. Now here is the crucial question: how would Theo treat his belief after he discovered that the defeater was misleading? Very plausibly, given that he held on to his belief all along, he will now also treat himself as having known all along. We can easily imagine him saying things like "I knew that the diamonds were in that place" when recounting the story later on. At the same time, it is of course overwhelmingly plausible that Theo is mistaken when he takes himself to have known all along. If so, the fact that Theo would describe himself as knowing once apprised of all the relevant facts provides little reason to believe that Theo did in fact know. Given that this is so, we also have reason to be suspicious of Pritchard's claim that, in his case, the subject's willingness to treat himself as having seen that p constitutes good reason to believe that he did in fact see that p .

One might respond by claiming that Pritchard's argument is better viewed as an inference that starts from what would be a *correct description* of the subject, rather than from how the subject would treat himself. That is, we can infer that the subject in the example did see that there was a barn because we would, in these circumstances, quite naturally describe him as having seen that there was a barn. However, even if it is natural to describe the subject as having seen that p (which already appears questionable), then it is still not yet clear that this is a *correct* description of the subject. What exactly is the motivation for supposing that we can correctly describe the subject in Pritchard's example as having seen that p ? Note that a first motivation, that a subject would treat himself as having seen that p , is by now already off the table.

We are now entering into a linguistic debate about the meaning of "see that p " that has been more extensively explored by Craig French (2012). According to French, we can capture all that is intuitive about Pritchard's case by using either non-factive perceptual vocabulary (for

⁴ Note that these kinds of examples have also been extensively discussed by both (French, 2012) and (Ranalli, 2014). However, they do not discuss the general method of inferring that a subject saw that p from the fact that he would later treat himself as having seen that p . Ranalli argues that the example fails against SK because it equally supports the view that knowledge does not entail (occurrent) belief, while French argues against the example on the basis of linguistic evidence. I will return to French's point later on.

⁵ Thanks to [...] for providing me with this example.

instance, by saying that the subject sees the object in front of him *as* a barn), or simple seeing vocabulary (for instance, by saying that the subject sees a barn) (French, 2012, p. 118). There simply is no additional motivation to suppose that it is also linguistically correct to say that the subject sees *that* there is a barn. In fact, according to French, there is linguistic evidence to the contrary: when “*S* sees that *p*” is used in these contexts, it’s being used in the *visuo-epistemic* sense. In these contexts, subjects are represented as *knowledgeable* about *p* on the basis of vision (French, 2012, pp. 123).

However, we should be careful not to end up in a debate about linguistic intuitions.⁶ Instead of asking whether or not we, strictly speaking, can correctly use the phrase “*S* sees that *p*” without entailing that *S* has knowledge that *p*, a more interesting question is whether the usage in which seeing that *p* does entail knowing that *p* is conceptually prior to the usage in which it does not (assuming for the sake of argument that both exist). The fact that Pritchard cannot really define seeing that *p* without recourse to knowing that *p*, as we saw in the previous section, already indicates that it is.

This point is further supported by the uncontroversial fact that in *paradigm cases* of perceptual knowledge, a subject who sees that *p* also knows that *p*. This makes it plausible that, even if there are two different usages of “*S* sees that *p*”, it’s still the knowledge-entailing use that is being applied in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge. But this is a problem for Pritchard, since he specifically wants to account for those paradigm cases with his epistemological disjunctivism. If, in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge, people are correctly described by the knowledge-entailing use of “seeing that *p*”, then the basis problem for epistemological disjunctivism remains in full force — even if there are non-paradigmatic cases in which people use “seeing that *p*” in a non-knowledge-entailing way.

3.2 Seeing that *p* without being in a good position to know that *p*

So far we’ve seen that, to say the least, Pritchard makes a controversial inference from how a subject’s state would be treated or described to the conclusion that the subject actually is in that state. But the problems for his motivation of SPK do not end there. Let’s waive the first objection, and suppose that Pritchard’s example succeeds in showing that SK is incorrect. The second problem is that a parallel example can now be constructed which shows that SPK is also incorrect.

For this parallel example, consider our by now familiar subject, Barney, once more. Barney is in an objectively rather than subjectively bad scenario. That is, Barney does not have any misleading defeaters, but is instead in an inhospitable environment where most structures that look like barns are in fact mere façades, albeit ones that are constructed so cleverly as to be indistinguishable from real barns from Barney’s position on the road. As mentioned before, it is widely agreed, even by Pritchard, that Barney is not in a position to know of barn-shaped objects that they are barns. Suppose that Barney spots one barn-shaped object, which happens to be a real barn, and comes to believe that it is a barn. However, let’s also suppose that, later on, Barney learns that he was in fake barn county but was looking at one of the real barns in the area. It seems that, in this case, it is as natural for Barney to describe himself as having seen that *p* as it is for the agent in Pritchard’s case. Given that, in Pritchard’s case, the fact that the subject naturally describes himself as having seen that the target proposition is true is sufficient to conclude that the subject has actually seen that the target proposition is true, the same should go for this example: Barney saw that there was a barn in front of him. However, Barney was not in a position to know that there was a barn in front of him. In consequence, if

⁶Compare the debate about whether remembering that *p* entails knowing that *p* (Bernecker, 2010; Adams, 2011; Moon, 2013).

Pritchard's case constitutes a counterexample to SK, then the Barney case is a counterexample to SPK as well. This means that a crucial building block in Pritchard's solution to the basis problem crumbles. Without SPK, Pritchard lacks an account that can accommodate, first, the thesis that seeing that p does not entail knowing that p , and, second, the thesis that Barney does not see (and thereby know) that p . Given that these are the desiderata for Pritchard's account of seeing that p , Pritchard will have failed to provide an adequate answer to the basis problem.

Of course it is open for Pritchard to reject his own example, and to accept SPK solely on the grounds that it supports an epistemological theory, i.e., epistemological disjunctivism, with great theoretical advantages. But now that we have a better grip on SPK, it's not so clear that these theoretical advantages are still present. For instance, consider Pritchard's claim that his theory can capture the key elements of internalism and externalism. One thing traditional internalists and externalists have in common is their attempt to provide a *reductive* account of knowledge. In contrast, we've seen that the most sense could be made out of SPK if it was understood as being part of a *knowledge first* account. So traditional internalists and externalists will already feel that a key element of their position is no longer on the table.⁷

Moreover, Alan Millar (2010) has provided an alternative version of knowledge first epistemological disjunctivism that can simply accept SK. The important difference between Millar and Pritchard is that Millar defines perceptual knowledge in terms of perceptual-recognition abilities that do not depend on a subject's possession of evidence or reasons (Millar, 2010, pp. 125–7). So on this account, seeing that p is no longer used as the *basis for* knowledge that p , and the basis problem disappears. However, Millar's view remains epistemological disjunctivist in that one can use the fact that one sees that p as a reason to *justify* one's claim that p (Millar, 2010, pp. 137–40).⁸ This account will be able to incorporate many of Pritchard's desiderata without falling prey to the basis problem. So without separate motivation, SPK, and Pritchard's epistemological disjunctivism with it, are definitely in trouble.

4 Conclusion

I have argued that Pritchard's epistemological disjunctivism has failed to provide a satisfying answer to the basis problem. The required alternative account of seeing that p (SPK) can only be properly understood if one understands it in a knowledge first way, and it cannot be supported over the usual account of seeing that p (SK) on the basis of the example that Pritchard provides. This example uses an invalid inference from how a subject would be treated or described to how that subject actually is, and this inference even backfires against SPK itself in a parallel example. Moreover, if SPK cannot be independently motivated, then there is reason to prefer other versions of epistemological disjunctivism over Pritchard's. The basis problem thus remains unresolved.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Jan Heylen, Mona Simion, and an anonymous referee for their comments and helpful suggestions. Special thanks to Chris Kelp for extensive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

⁷ Also see (Madison, 2013) for an argument that epistemological disjunctivism has not captured the key element of internalism, and (Kelp and Ghijsen, 2014) for an argument that it also lacks a key element of externalism.

⁸ See (Kelp and Ghijsen, 2014) for more on the comparison between Pritchard's and Millar's epistemological disjunctivism.

References

- Adams, F. (2011). Husker du? *Philosophical studies*, 153(1):81–94.
- Bernecker, S. (2010). *Memory: A philosophical study*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cassam, Q. (2007). *The Possibility of Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- French, C. (2012). Does propositional seeing entail propositional knowledge? *Theoria*, 78:115–127.
- Goldman, A. (1976). Discrimination and perceptual knowledge. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73(20):771–791.
- Kelp, C. and Ghijsen, H. (2014). Perceptual justification: Factive reasons and fallible virtues. In Mi, C., Slote, M., and Sosa, E., editors, *The Virtue Turn*. (commissioned manuscript).
- Madison, B. (2013). Epistemological disjunctivism and the new evil demon. *Acta Analytica*, online first, DOI 10.1007/s12136-013-0194-4, pages 1–10.
- Millar, A. (2010). Knowledge and recognition. In Pritchard, D., Millar, A., and Haddock, A., editors, *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*, pages 89–188. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moon, A. (2013). Remembering entails knowing. *Synthese*, 190:2717–2729.
- Pritchard, D. (2011). Epistemological disjunctivism and the basis problem. *Philosophical Issues*, 21(1):434–455.
- Pritchard, D. (2012a). Anti-luck virtue epistemology. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 109(3):247–279.
- Pritchard, D. (2012b). *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ranalli, C. (2014). Luck, propositional perception, and the entailment thesis. *Synthese*, 191:1223–1247.
- Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.